

COMMUNIO

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VIATORUM

THEOLOGY OF THE 'IN-BETWEEN' •

OLDER THAN ALL CREATION •

INTO THE ABYSS OF THE UNCONSCIOUS •

RETRIEVING THE SPIRITUAL SENSES IN THE WAKE OF HANS URS VON BALTHASAR •

DO CHRISTIANS AND MUSLIMS BELIEVE IN THE SAME GOD? •

BY

ANDREW LOUTH, JOHN BEHR, MICHAEL BAKKER, YVES DE MAESENEER AND PAVEL HOŠEK

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TRUTH ENCOUNTERED IN THE DETAIL¹

“Truth is in the details” writes Richard Schneider.² Thus the detail that does not fit to the schemes that we have made of reality has a special value. Its “unknown immensity” both “seduces and menaces our knowledge”.³

This issue of *Communio Viatorum* offers some encounters with theological themes and methods that are not often part of the ecumenical conversation because they do not fit. Their detail, I wish to argue, reminds us of the fact that whatever part of the theological heritage we work with and are familiar with, there is a probably a still larger part that we feel estranged from, and consciously or subconsciously disregard as no longer fitting to our time or culture. Or to be more precise, it does not fit to the segments of time or culture which we are tempted at times to consider the whole. The forgotten faces, struggles, discussions, have become parts of us to which we have lost access, and yet, sometimes, in a moment of revelation, a detail can expand our horizons and bring us to a home we thought we no longer had.

A friend recently guided my husband and me through the churches of Utrecht. Seeing a long list of previous pastors carved in one of them, he remarked: “And this is what for us Protestants is the iconography of the communion of saints”. The detail betrayed – or revealed, depending from which position we look at it – what did not have space in the doctrinal accounts of orthodox Calvinism of the previous centuries. Or St Nicholas Church in Prague’s Little Town displays a statue of St Ignatius piercing Martin Luther, a detail I had not noticed until my Jesuit friend pointed it out to me, speaking of how immune we have

¹ This introduction and compilation of the issue is a part of the research project “Symbolic Mediation of Wholeness in Western Orthodoxy”, GAČR P401/11/1688.

² Richard Schneider, “Orthodox Iconology (1): Iconography within the context of Worship”, shortened version, manuscript of lecture notes from St Vladimir Seminary, Crestwood, NY, 2010, p. 1.

³ See Richard Schneider, “General Hermeneutics and the New Historiography: A Theological Challenge for Church History Methodology, a Semiotic Challenge for Faith” manuscript of lectures from St Vladimir Seminary, Crestwood, NY, 2010, pp. 1–20, here 5–6; compare to Michel de Certeau, *L’Absent de l’histoire*, Paris: Mme, 1973, pp. 8–9; *The Writing of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1988, pp. 3–9.

become to a fabled and sacralised history. Once in Dublin, another friend did not believe me that in his own church there was a statue of a crucified Mary with a healed alcoholic under the cross, until I showed him. And then we talked about the kind of belief we could not deep down understand and yet that was, for someone else, real. These images, snapshots coming out of my memory can, I am sure, be complemented by many others supplied by readers of this issue. They are details which do not fit, and which in the first instance we may wish to exclude or excuse as insignificant irregularities. Yet they speak, perhaps not more loudly than what surrounds them, and yet, with what they say they can teach us to perceive what does not fit in an automatic way.

My plea for sensitivity towards the unexpected in no way wishes to diminish the art of judgment, of knowing the tree according to its fruits, or, in other words, of being able to trust the validity of our previous experiences. The “unknown seducing and menacing of our knowledge” has always been a condition of theological knowledge, enabling it to purify itself of ideological tendencies. Yet, the sense of mystery has been often too abstract. The truth that is in the detail presumes particularity, it is embodied, at the threshold between the expected and the unexpected. And it is my hope that some of this truth will be communicated by the following articles.

They will deal with a question raised from different sides, whether the ancients and the other religions today “see” and worship a different or the same God, and how either position impacts on our understanding of who Christ is, and whether there are areas of life to which he is unrelated. The articles will explore what kind of theological vision creation *ex nihilo* articulates, and how other scriptural and patristic texts complement but also challenge this vision as they assume figures that are older than creation, such as an old barren woman, older than all creation, seen as a type of Mary and of the Church. Besides the Scriptural and Patristic sources we will include into our seeking for the truth revealed in the details also the living language of the liturgy, and the mystical experience, the forgotten rituals, such as the service of the light. All these elements carried within themselves a unique beauty and depth, the therapeutic aspects of Christian spirituality, seeking at the same time for where worlds of pastoral theology and psychotherapy

meet and where they differ, when speaking about the descent into the abyss of the unknown.

The first article by Fr. Andrew Louth will explore why the polarised explanations of reality, whether philosophical or theological, ultimately cannot do without the “excluded middle”, the mediating “in-between”. Louth concentrates on the dispute between Florovsky and Bulgakov concerning sophiology, and asks whether the “in-between”, like Sophia, but also the Saints, icons or the sacraments, is opposed to Christ as a pagan residuum or whether it is established by him.

In the second article Fr. John Behr takes the argument further, as he shows how quickly we run into difficulties if we restrict the textual basis of our theological convictions. His argument starts with the references to some of the Isaian hymns in Paul. These references in turn served as a foundation for the theological vision of Patristic authors such as the author of *The Shepherd of Hermas*, Clement of Rome, Ignatius of Antioch, even Irenaeus and Tertullian. These writers and the scriptural tradition on which they draw indicate the complexity involved in claiming that the creation *ex nihilo* is a basis for saying that God’s communication with creation is unmediated except through Christ.

Also the next article written by Fr. Michael Bakker remains in the Scriptural-Patristic territory, as it explores the notion of the abyss between God and the human person, as it is thematised in the Psalms and in the Church Fathers, predominantly by St Maximus the Confessor. In interpreting the threat and the therapeutic possibilities coming out of the abyss experiences, Bakker takes up the challenge expressed by two of the modern Russian émigré thinkers, Nikolai Berdyaev and Paul Evdokimov, as he brings into relationship insights from spiritual life focussed on the human heart and insights from psychoanalysis, particularly from Freud and Jung, focussed on the “unconscious”. Bakker follows how the conversation with psychoanalysis started and criticizes the fact that in the first instance the spiritual-theological perspective was underplayed. Then, with the help of Vladimir Lossky, Fr. Dumitru Stăniloae and Metropolitan Kallistos Ware he looks at the possibilities of reciprocity between God and us, when “abyss is calling to abyss” (Ps 42:7), and Christ standing in between both worlds makes love and knowledge of God (whether conscious or unconscious) possible.

The article by Yves Maeseneer takes as its starting point St Irenaeus's emphasis on the divine glory in a human person that is fully alive, something which consists in beholding God. This source of life, perceptible by "the spiritual senses", is according to Maeseneer retrieved by the Swiss Roman Catholic theologian Hans Urs von Balthasar. The "spiritual senses" in Balthasar, Maeseneer points out, are far from the types of spiritualities desiring to escape the messy bodily life for an idealised spiritual one. They are rooted in Christ's incarnation and in his kenosis. Going back to Aquinas, Balthasar, in his view, recovers the movement of God's descending love, a movement of humility and vulnerability, in which we can sense theological responses to the horrors in our history. Balthasar's high Christology, according to Maeseneer, advocates that the movement of Christ's self-giving is at the same time a movement of exchange, in which we receive new sight, hearing, touch, flair, taste, and our formerly deadened senses are filled with life. The gift, however, is not the end-product, they have to be trained, to be step by step united with the movement of the divine self-giving love. Maeseneer points out that it is worth considering whether our current liturgical emphasis on doxology would not still need to be complemented by the emphasis on the process of transformation, which Balthasar saw so vividly present e.g. in the pre-conciliar service of *Tenebrae*, celebrated on Holy Saturday, as the in-between between the darkness of Good Friday and the joy and light of the Resurrection.

Finally, Pavel Hošek's article examines Miroslav Volf's response to the series of events, documents and meetings evoked by an open letter to the Pope and other Christian leaders, entitled *A Common Word between Us and You*, and signed by 138 Muslim leaders and scholars. Hošek traces the Christian reaction to this public statement from 2007 asking for recognition of shared love for neighbour and for God among Christians and Muslims, facing similar challenges in today's world, and then, in detail analyses Volf's recent book, *Allah. A Christian Response* dealing with the question as to whether Christians and Muslims believe in the same God.

Ivana Noble, Prague

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